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If It Ain't Here When I Get Back

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If It Ain't Here When I Get Back

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Abstract

If It Ain't Here When I Get Back is a short film which explores themes of sibling rivalry, time and memory, our relationship to place, and the porous line between childhood and adulthood. It was produced between March 2020-April 2021 including pre-production to post-production. This paper describes and analyzes the filmmaking process for Clara Riedlinger, director. In this paper I will also attempt to put to words the intangibles of that process, including the social dynamics of filmmaking, and larger cultural happenings at the time of production.

Introduction

If It Ain't Here When I Get Back tells the story of two siblings left alone for a day at their family cottage on Seneca Lake. Early in the day, a sister tries to get her brother to swim with her, seeking to relive childhood memories that resurface in the late summer air. As it becomes clearer that the brother, though he too holds onto these memories, has forged his own path, the sister tries to prove to herself as much as her brother that he still needs her. She attempts to scold him for putting them in danger with a penny on the railroad tracks, though they have both flattened pennies without incident many times. Then, she makes fun of him for entertaining himself with a skateboard. In the next scene, he skips rocks alone, and we see that the brother is equally enamored with what this land has to offer. The siblings exist in their own world, separate from everything that lies beyond the lake valley. The only thing penetrating their microcosm is the huge freight train that runs by to flatten the penny they placed earlier, right at the edge of their universe. The sound of the train totally engulfs their universe, drowning out the waves, crickets, and birds with mechanical screeches. This reminder of the outside world moves the story and dialogue outside as well. The sister asks her brother about his college prospects, only to find that he has none; he's going off on his own. The main conflict in this story is at its clearest here: she imagines her brother as a young child in need of guidance, and his sudden admission that he is already beginning adulthood shatters this illusion. Her seeming lack of direction contrasts with his decision to be intentional about his future. He's more mature than she gave him credit for, and she still wants to reassert herself. She tries to build a fire, only to be shown yet again that her younger brother doesn't need her help. In a last ditch effort, she makes sure her brother's first beer is with her. In this scene, the tables turn. Now, it's his turn to see into her world. He too

reverts back to early childhood activities. Though whereas his sister reached back with a fear of losing fleeting memories and comfortable relationship identities, he looks back with a sense of love and comfort. He recognizes that something is being left behind, but doesn't fear the temporary nature of existence. After all, the rocks were here before them and will continue on without them. He offers her wet shale rocks to pop in the fire - a forbidden activity when adults are watching - and finally agrees to jump into the water. The jump into the water serves as both a relinquishing of fear, and a symbol of transition from one stage in life to the next. When he jumps in, he is no longer small enough to avoid hitting the sharp rocks at the bottom. He cuts his hand and must, for the first time that day, rely on his sister for care. This breaks down the barrier left between them, and the two are finally able to express their underlying anxieties about the future. At the end of the evening, as they lay in the "kids bed" together, an adult enters, unseen. Only the audio penetrating their tiny world.

My family's cottage on the shore of Seneca Lake has always been a great inspiration to me. Each year, as I return, I consider the ways in which the water, rocks, and built structures have shaped my understanding of my place in the world at large, as well as within the microcosm of my family. In many ways, *If It Ain't Here When I Get Back* is not a definitive answer to these questions, but rather the document of my search. I began by asking myself what was important to me about this specific plot of land? What do I want to remember when I look back on it in fifty years? A hundred years? Who stood here one hundred years before me? What was here a thousand years before my grandfather put the first nail in the first railroad tie that came to be the wall separating the living room from the lake? Looking at these questions photographically and sonically seemed a logical exploration.

As a child, I was surrounded by landscape photographs by Ansel Adams [1], Brett Weston[2], and Carl Chiarenza[3], whose sense of scale, majesty, and geologic time seemed to perfectly capture the magic of rock in pure black and white. I began my own exploration process by studying their work, and attempting to re-create Ansel Adams' process of pre-visualization using the zone system technique, updated for the digital age.

At the same time, I knew that I wanted to approach my story from a documentary perspective, even though the story itself is fictional. In many ways, I approached this film as a document of our collective filmmaking experience. In order to do that, I decided to work with actors to improvise various scenarios pulled from each of our memories, and film the improvisations as a document of our memory-exploration. This meant that the editing process would also necessarily echo the documentary editing process because the narrative would be shaped and shifted based on what I chose to include or exclude; the final course of the film would be decided just as much in the cutting room as in the field.

Because I set out to create a memory of a non-existent reality, I wanted to involve other people in building a shared reality based on collective memory. In order to do this, I reached out to collaborators who I knew would be invested in experimenting with me, in feeling out these relationships and the sense of place at the cottage, and who would be curious about creating a story and images together. One of the people with whom I have many shared memories at the

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[1] Ansel Adams, North American, and American, Born: US, CA, San Francisco, 1902, Died: US, CA, Carmel, 1984. *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico 1941*. Accessed May 3, 2021. https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.15025477.
[2] Brett Weston. *Untitled*. Accessed May 3, 2021. https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.17447003.
[3] Carl Chiarenza, North American, and American, Born 1935, (Photographer),. *Richmond 19*. Accessed May 3, 2021. https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.15643378.

cottage is my brother, Will. I recognize that my memories of certain moments differ entirely from his, because we are different people with different perspectives. I decided to use the sibling relationship to explore this idea of shared memories. I asked my friends, Jake and Piper, who were both interested in improvisation in acting, to improvise a brother-sister relationship and power dynamic to create this memory with no adults, in which children on the cusp of adulthood realize their separate paths. Over the course of the summer of 2020, we worked together to pool our own memories and build a story based on these questions. We travelled several times to Watkins Glen in order to give Jake and Piper a sense of rootedness in the geography.

Pre-production took two distinct tracks: first, creative pre-production, which included working with actors to determine the improvisations and overall course of the narrative. There was no storyboard or script, which was only possible given my own deep understanding and familiarity with the landscape, and immense trust in my actors to fully buy into this process. And second, technical pre-production, which included the exploration of the tools and techniques I would need to master in order to achieve the image quality I sought, as well as planning and scheduling shoots.

I went down to Watkins Glen several times on my own, as well as with Adam Schaefer, my collaborator in cinematography, to practice filming there, choose angles, and determine if any specific equipment would be required. Much of my research for the project was technical. In order to have the creative freedom to feel out the story on the fly, I needed to make sure that every technical aspect was practiced and considered ahead of time. I created in-camera filters based on the colored filters used by Ansel Adams and other f/64 group photographers to boost

contrast levels without losing any tonal quality, and I practiced the Zone System and photographic pre-visualization techniques throughout the fall and winter prior to filming. I also researched past weather patterns, sunrise and sunset times, heat indexes, and made very careful note of seasonal plants. I realized that most of the filming would need to take place early in the morning and in the early evening in order to create the specific types of shadows that I wanted, but still have enough light to film with a very small aperture to create a deep-focused background. We had a very small window of weekends in which we would be able to film, given the water temperatures and cycles of the wildflowers and needing to create believable continuity. If an evening primrose was blooming in one shot, but had wilted in the next, the illusion of memory and reality would be broken.

Production took place during two weekends in August 2020. Serving as my own producer, I built lots of buffer time into the shooting schedule. I wanted to be sure that the feeling of a relaxed and nostalgic end-of-summer-last-weekend-at-the-lake was preserved, and that nothing ever felt rushed. We were able to concentrate on creating long, wide, shots with slow camera movements, and really allow scenes to unfold organically because we didn't need to hurry the schedule. We shot mostly chronologically due to extreme changes in the light throughout the day. Filming in order also meant that the actors were really able to settle into their characters and the format by the time we reached the more emotionally charged portions of the story.

The cast and crew arrived on Thursday night of the first weekend. We cooked together and spent time in the water, getting to know the landscape. Early Friday morning, we woke up and began filming shortly after 8 AM. After filming the first few scenes, it became too bright, and the

shadows were too short to create interesting contours, so we paused for several hours until the sun had lowered again. We filmed the next set of scenes until about 7 PM, when it became too dark for the light to match from scene to scene. We repeated this process the next day, Saturday, before packing up and returning to Rochester on Sunday.

Prior to the second weekend, news of Daniel Prude's murder broke in Rochester, and we decided to cut our production short. It was important to me that everyone in the cast and crew had space to process the extreme levels of stress, and it felt impossible, almost silly, to film during this time, when our community was grieving and fighting - many people fighting for their lives in ways that none of us could imagine. Together, we decided that the best option would be to film quickly and get back to Rochester earlier than initially planned. We arrived in Watkins Glen Friday night. By this time, we were all used to the rhythm of filming in this style, so everything moved very smoothly. We filmed from about 7 AM to 11 AM, and again from 3 PM to 6 PM on Saturday and were able to complete principal photography. We rushed back to Rochester, and I didn't look at the footage until mid-September.

After production was complete, I began editing the film. I had taken extensive scene notes, so it was easy to sync all the sound and footage and pull selects, just as I would do for a documentary. It was especially interesting to discover the ways in which specific lines and performances, as I reorganized them or chose variations, could have a dramatic effect on the subtext of the film, and could shift the relationship between the two characters. I often asked myself, "what shared memory of theirs does this line hint at?" in order to shape the narrative.

The general sketch of the story was complete by the end of the Fall semester, at which point I felt ready to show an in-progress cut to an audience. During the SOFA in-progress screenings, I received excellent feedback, which helped me tighten the rest of the cut and strengthen the story. This mostly revolved around cutting some shots shorter, and shifting some cuts in dialogue-heavy scenes to include more reactions. Based on that, I learned that so much of a relationship is defined by one person's reactions to another. After that screening, I decided to add more reaction shots throughout the film, which I believe clarified not only the siblings' relationship to each other, but also to the location, and to each character's personal history.

After getting close to picture lock, I realized that I would need to re-record some lines, add foley, and carve away some of the longer shots that I really loved. There were a few lines that suddenly felt essential to the story, mostly for relationship-building purposes, but that hadn't been properly mic'd due the ultra-wide angle, and the overpowering volume of the waves. The final step of editing was to record ADR, which I did in my car, since I didn't want to ask my actors to go to the RIT campus and use a shared studio mic during the pandemic. Luckily, the re-recorded lines fit easily into the rest of the audio mix. I built up an ambient landscape with field recordings made on location, mostly birds, crickets, and waves. Certain other sounds required foley recording. Lastly, I experimented with several different approaches to music.

The title of the film comes from a line in the traditional song *Cumberland Gap*. There are many variations of the lyrics, though they often include the phrase "If it ain't here when I get back/I'll raise hell in the Cumberland Gap." Usually, the song tells the story of a person who leaves their home, for work or for war, and returns later, hoping that things will have remained the same.

This parallels my feelings about the cottage in Watkins Glen, and I feel a deep connection to it. Each summer, when I return to the sagging structure, I am not sure until I lay eyes on it whether or not it will have been swallowed up by the waves in the preceding winter. I say with a sigh of great relief that so far, it has always been there. However, when my grandfather built it, he built the breakfront with recycled wood and rusty steel beams, and that was nearly sixty years ago. Any repairs since have been merely bandaids on the gunshot wound of erosion. I am infinitely aware of the temporary nature of my memory palace. My grandfather was not stronger than mother nature, though he tried.

For these reasons, any music in my film would have to be exactly right, or risk changing my entire relationship with the film. I attempted several different versions of the song, some more experimental, others purely traditional source recordings, and nothing felt quite right. Eventually, I decided to record the chords of the song myself, with the timing inspired by the timing of cuts in the film and the flow of the lake's waves, rather than limit myself exclusively to the rhythm of the tune. Using a combination of synth and guitar, my partner, JT Fitzgerald and I were able to craft a piece of music that almost breathes with the film; the soundscape drifting imperceptibly into and out of the rest of the diegetic audio. In some scenes, music is present, but so quiet that most viewers would not notice the notes, but would be affected by the subtle shift in mood.

Now, having finished editing the film, I feel immensely satisfied with the work. I tried not to have too firm of expectations ahead of time, as I believe inflexible expectations often lead to a rigid, authoritarian approach, which isn't suited well to collaborative work. That being said, the final version of the film expresses all of the emotions I wished to express, and looks nearly

identical to the images floating around in my head. Then again, now that the film is made, I'll never know which came first: the film, or my memory of it.

Review of Research

The first major part of my research for this film was an exploration of different approaches to improvisational filmmaking. There are two main categories of improvised film which I digested: mockumentaries, and pre-improvised scripted films. The mockumentaries were mostly comedies. In particular, I looked at *This is Spinal Tap* (1984, Rob Reiner and Christopher Guest)[4], as well as the thematically related documentary *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* (1986, John Heyn, Jeff Krulik)[5]. The relationships between the characters in *Spinal Tap* and the lead up to conflict and the band's downfall certainly influenced the way I approached the build up to conflict in my film, but understanding Christopher Guest's writing process was the biggest influence from that particular film. Guest created a "bible" which outlined character backstory and relationships, which allowed the actors to draw from that background while interacting with each other. I took a similar approach with my film, though my actors took a very active role in creating that outline, and their character backstories. The tone of *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* was something that really appealed to me. It's also a story that takes place over a single day, and feels very nostalgic but doesn't gloss over conflict.

One other form of mockumentary that I looked at was a fictional story presented as truth. *Lake Mungo* (2008, Joel Anderson)[6] is one film which falls into this category. *Lake Mungo* is a psychological horror film that tells the story of a teenage girl who disappears near her home in Australia. It is filmed with documentary film language, such as talking head "interviews" and reenactments of events which had never taken place. Ultimately these reenactments were the

[4] *This is Spinal Tap*. Directed by Rob Reiner. Los Angeles County: Embassy Home Entertainment, 1984. VHS.
[5] *Heavy Metal Parking Lot.* Directed by John Heyn and Jeff Krulik. Landover, Maryland, 1986. VHS.
[6] *Lake Mungo.* Directed by Joel Anderson. Australia: Arclight Films, 2008. DVD.

most intriguing aspect of the film for me, and I decided to take that approach into my own filmmaking process. Reenacting scenes which are supposed to have happened in the past, but which have never happened at all, raises questions about the fluidity of time and memory, and throws a light on the subjective nature of our memories. These were important things for me to keep in mind throughout the filmmaking process.

The other type of improvised film that I studied was the fictional narrative film with a script created through improvisation and then re-memorized. The main film that fell into this category during my research was *Secrets and Lies* (1996, Mike Leigh)[7]. During the writing and production of *Secrets and Lies*, cast members rehearsed scenes based on an outline, and came up with the script collaboratively with director Mike Leigh. Similarly to my own film, the actors were able to form specific relationships to each other while in character, and move the story forward based on those interactions. Different from my own approach, Mike Leigh opted to finesse and tighten the script based on those rehearsals, which the actors then memorized and performed.

Lastly, I considered films which were hybrid documentary-fiction films. Most notably, Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* (2010)[8]. *Le Quattro Volte* depicts four cycles of animate life based on the philosophy of Pythagoras. Pythagoras believed that every object was divine, and contained within it four cycles of life: mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. Frammartino used both staged scenes and documentary footage of a small town in Calabria, both Frammartino and Pythagoras' homeland, to compose a slow, cyclical film that covers these four cycles. The line between fiction and documentary is imperceptible in the minutes-long takes.

[7] *Secrets and Lies.* Directed by Mike Leigh. Southgate, London, UK: FilmFour Distributors, 1996. DVD.
[8] *Le Quattro Volte.* Directed by Michelangelo Frammartino. Calabria, Italy: Cinecittà Luce, 2010, DVD.

Eventually, even the townspeople and the animals become part of the Calabrian landscape, which in turn becomes a character. The interplays between fiction and truth, and landscape and character, were aspects of this film that I also sought to express in *If It Ain't Here When I Get Back*.

Michelle Citron's book *Home Movies and other Necessary Fictions*[9] was also influential in my research for this film. In it, she details the ways in which she used filmmaking as a tool to process past family trauma. By creating a film based on her own memories, and then showing the script and subsequent film to her mother, she was able to add another layer of reflection, and bring her memories closer to her subjective reality. She discusses watching home movies from her childhood which do not depict the trauma which she knows was occurring at the same time. In the home movies, she searches for evidence of distress and conflict which may prove her memories true, and finally allow her to move on. In making my own film, I often found myself searching for evidence of my ancestors. I knew that everything my actors touched, and the roles they were inhabiting, had also been touched and inhabited by my grandparents, cousins, parents, and brother. However, that same cottage and the land it now sits on look immensely different from when my grandparents first built it out, and even from my own childhood memories. Years of erosion and financial neglect have slowly eaten away at the shoreline and will eventually take the whole structure. So in many ways, the making of this film served as my own evidence that we were all here. Now, when the cottage is sucked to the bottom of the lake, and the water rises up to the train tracks and waves crash against steep shale rather than the stony slope, the images of this film will be what we have left to remember our movements in and around this family plot.

[9] Citron, Michelle. *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Similarly to the tensions existent within my memory of and the reality of the cottage in Watkins Glen, I wanted to underscore the tensions between reality and fiction, landscape and character, and individual and collective. My research of the films mentioned above informed many aspects of my production process and approach to this film. Based on this research, I knew that I wanted the film to be entirely improvised, and to be a mix of my own memories, and those of my collaborators. I also wanted to create a world within a world of the landscape, which felt at once expansive and closed off. I wanted the production in some ways to be out of my hands - how would the water behave? Would a train go by? Would it rain? Would other people make themselves present in the story, riding by on boats, walking down the train tracks, or playing in the water nearby? All of these uncertainties forced me to take a more organic approach to the filmmaking process vs. the more rigid process of a traditional narrative film.

The next major phase of research involved deciding on the look of the film, and the technical requirements for achieving that look. I knew, based on my own explorations of memory and photography, that I wanted to film in black and white with ultra deep focus. I drew from the stylistic and technical approaches of the f/64 group, whose deep-focus landscape photography imbues geographic features with an almost spiritual essence. Treating the landscape as a subject on par with human characters was an important aspect of my storytelling approach, as was reference to family snapshots and historical photographic processes. With that in mind, I began by studying the zone system, a technique for the previsualization and processing of black and white photographs developed by Ansel Adams, and now used by many photographers and cinematographers. I first followed instructions written by Minor White, in his book *Zone System*

Manual.[10] The book is a technical manual with exercises and instructions for how to use the zone system. Because this is a practical approach, I went into the field throughout the winter of 2019-2020 and taught myself the zone system techniques outlined in the book.
I also used writing in Ansel Adams' *Polaroid Land Photography*[11] book to help develop various in-camera filters for different types of landscapes and lighting scenarios. Often, Adams used red or blue filters over the lens of his camera to achieve different levels of contrast, which could then be altered and shifted in the dark room process. Adams' darkroom processing and printmaking would be akin to the post-production and color grading of my film.

Early in the summer of 2020, once I was comfortable with the basics of the zone system, my cinematographer and I travelled to Watkins Glen with our cameras, lenses, and several shades of blue, red, and purple gels to test on location. We knew that the approach would need to be slightly altered to work for a digital camera, rather than on film, and that there would be no printing process. So Adams' previsualization techniques for printing out would need to be adjusted for in-camera use. Based on these tests, we decided to use a slightly blue filter over the monochrome image. This results in the water of the lake appearing almost black.

After that test, I created a LUT to emulate the blue filter and monochrome, which we used to monitor the picture as we were shooting, but did not bake into the image to allow for tweaks in post-production. We also realized early on that we would be restricted to filming in the morning and evenings and would need to break for the high noon sun, and that a series of neutral density filters would be necessary to keep exposure levels low, even with a nearly closed aperture.

[10] White, Minor. *Zone System Manual*. New York, New York: Morgan & Morgan, 1972.
[11] Adams, Ansel. *Polaroid Land Photography, First Revised Edition.* Boston, Massachusetts: New York Graphic Society: Boston, 1978.

Another challenge presented by this style of photography is that the compositions need to be clear and intentional, even with the background entirely in focus. I wanted to be sure that I had a strong grasp on possible compositions before we filmed so that there would be room to improvise without taking too long to set up shots. In the weekends leading up to the shoot, I travelled to Watkins Glen twice on my own to test different angles, and to watch the sunrise and sunset so that I could take notes on the light angles at different times of the day. During those weekends, I created a test real using the LUT that Adam and I had previously developed. I also tested different camera setups including setting the camera on the ground, using the tripod in shallow water, and filming underneath the dock. Many of the shots created during this experimentation became the landscape and reaction shots used in the final version of the film. I was also able to use this real to communicate with Adam about the style, tone, and overall look I was after.

On another weekend prior to pre-production, I took Jake and Piper, my actors, to Watkins Glen so they could get a feel for the geography for the space. I wanted them to be able to think about the space during rehearsals, and understand the possibilities within the landscape while we were developing the outline that would serve as the loose script. This way, though we developed the story in Rochester, they could keep in mind how they might move towards and apart from each other during scenes of connectedness vs separation. It also gave them an awareness of the boundaries of the space, including the railroad tracks behind the cottage, the structure of the cottage itself, the water, and the Japanese knotweed which borders the neighboring property.

At this point, I felt confident that everyone was on the same page. We all had a strong understanding of the landscape and sense of the characters' relationship to that land. The next major hurdle would be story development and pre-production.

Pre Production

So much of this film existed in my head before I ever put anything to paper. The property has belonged to my family for two generations, so I only needed to coordinate with my cousins to tell them I'd be at the lake for a few weekends. No location releases required. I also already knew who my actor would be for the sister role, since I had collaborated with Piper on past projects, and knew she was up for the challenge. Much of the ideation at this stage took place in the Fall of 2019, well before the pandemic, which presented a whole slew of other challenges.

The first challenge was wondering whether or not we would film anything at all. When it was clear that RIT would be continuing course work, I knew I had to find a way to film. However, I didn't know if everyone would feel safe or have the mental and emotional capacity to film a story that, by its nature, needs to not be tethered to a specific moment in time, such as the pandemic. After some back and forth, some tense and emotional discussions, Piper, Adam and I all decided that we could find a way to move forward.

Initially, Piper had suggested an actor she had worked with previously to play her brother character. But as the nature of the pandemic became clearer, we decided it was important to cut down on the number of households all working together. Piper lives with Jake, who I had also worked with previously on another project which was not improvised. However, I knew that Jake would be game for improvisation. I realized that the one of the most important qualities for a collaborator in this experiment was a willingness to play with the process. Even though Jake did not appear as young as I initially envisioned the younger brother character, a quick beard shave,

buzz cut, and basketball shorts quick change, we were able to transform him into a high school junior.

I knew that Piper would be able to pull from her own life experience with siblings of differing ages to reenact family memories, so it was an easy choice to work with her. However, Jake is an only child, and I knew it would take some extra legwork to get him into the mindset of sibling rivalry and opposing family relationships. Luckily, I have known Jake since we were children, and was able to use that knowledge about his old friendships and the general group dynamics present in those relationships to guide his improvisations. Piper also worked with him to learn "how to argue with your siblings." Jake spent time around Piper's siblings as well, taking note of how they spoke to each other, and any power dynamics that came up.

In the meantime, I also interviewed my own brother. I asked him about his memories at the lake, including what activities stood out to him and what felt important to memorialize. He pointed to collecting beach glass, playing with crayfish in the water, and skipping rocks. He was much more interested in the quiet, introspective moments, rather than loud activity of jumping and splashing. In fact, the interior shots of the film were inspired by a portrait I had made of my brother around the summer of 2010, where he is sitting in my grandfather's recliner at the cottage, looking not particularly interested in the goings-on around him. The same recliner is still at the cottage, and the general layout of the room is still the same, and I wanted to recreate this image and put it in the context of a larger story.

Another image that helped me draw from my own memories at the cottage is a photograph I made in 2019 of my cousin's jetskis pulled up onto the shore.

This image is particularly interesting to me because it contains within it multiple timelines. First, the cleared pathway down this hill in the background, barely visible behind the invasive

tree-of-heaven, sumac, and ivy. The flora have completely overtaken the railing installed by my grandfather in 1964, though the shape and structure of it provides a distinctive frame for the plant life. The day lilies are the only intentional plants here; a staple of late summer finger lakes life. The sweet peas are invasive here, but native to the Italian peninsula, just as my grandparents were. The jet skis themselves are also reminiscent of the past. A sign of what was once an active family who could afford to play in the water, the second generation to live on this land and take advantage of all it has to offer. By the present, now the third generation, the jet skis no longer function, there is no one here to fix them up and ride them, and yet a deep emotional tie to the memories they represent prevents us from getting rid of them. Not to mention the difficulty of getting them up the hill, or the expense of hiring a boat to tow them further down the lake where they might be picked up. So the jet skis sit nestled into the sumac, like fish out of water, reminders of what our family just can't seem to unload.

Once myself, Piper, and Jake had separately collected enough memories to draw from, we came together to start shaping the story. The first time we met in my backyard - always meeting outdoors and staying six feet apart - we focused on fleshing out the characters and backstory. I discussed with them how I had interpreted my relationship with my own brother; he was always seen as more capable, but I also felt that he was given more support in exploring his own path. As I grew older, I realized that he had depended more on our sibling relationship than I had given him credit for. Piper also discussed how seeing her siblings grow up and go to college, which she did not do, had made her look back at her own past choices differently. Jake reflected on childhood friendships, and the activities that he would do to prove his value within his social group. We discussed the ways in which we would all separate ourselves and revert into our own

worlds as an emotional safety mechanism, and what things pushed our buttons. Jake's memories of his father, who is a psychologist, gave him some insight into how a younger, less emotionally mature person might respond to challenges to authority and interpersonal conflict. We also discussed the ways in which children might speculate about the world of adults, which feels so far away, yet exists in the same reality as the world of children.

The second time we met in my backyard, we started giving shape to the story. We had created a list of activities that the siblings might engage in, and who would be the initiator and the follower of each of those activities based on the character backstories that we had come up with in the previous rehearsal. Once we had that list, we drew from our knowledge of the geography of the location to guide the movements and order of those activities to shape the plot.

During the final two rehearsals, we had decided on the general plot structure and had a firm grasp of how each character would respond to the other. Now, we focused on fleshing out the various tensions and subtext of each scene. We dove deep into each scene, not worrying about any specific lines, but taking time to dissect what shared memory might have brought the siblings to this moment, and what each line might point back to that memory. We discussed how each character might have interpreted a shared memory differently, and might carry entirely different meanings into the present moment.

Once we had the general plot structure laid out, I created a list of all the scenes, and then broke those down based on location and time of day. It made sense to film mostly in chronological order due to the extreme angles of light created by the lake valley and summer sun, but it did not

make sense to move back and forth from multiple locations and reorient the camera each time. Also, because the film would be entirely improvised, we needed to make sure that we were capturing every line and reaction from multiple angles at once. This would allow us to cut smoothly between action/reaction shots even if the lines and movements were not the same in each take. For that reason, we decided to shoot with two cameras. This style of shooting required me to use specific gear. I needed to make sure that I had enough lenses from a matching set, adapters for those lenses for each camera, and enough hard drive storage space to record double the amount of footage than I would for a traditional narrative production. This put us into a more documentary mode of thinking and shooting, which would also eventually affect the editing process. We decided based on this to film the dialogue scenes almost as if they were two-person interviews, with one camera over each shoulder. The best format for creating a narrative in this style would be to film a master scene with one camera, running it all the way through rather than stopping, reframing, and filming close ups only for specific lines. Then, we would set up two cameras with close ups on each character, and run through the entire scene again. Sometimes we would run the scene multiple times with various different lines and improvisations, knowing that I might chop them up and rearrange the actions and reactions in the editing process.

With all the scenes laid out, I was then able to create a shooting schedule. This included more detail than the simple scene outlines, because it would be necessary to include travel time, break times, and extra time for improvisation. The schedule would need to be looser than a scripted film to allow time to explore the multiple possibilities within each scene. Keeping all that in mind, I developed a schedule that worked around the cast and crew's work schedules, allowed for us to take our time and not feel stressed or rushed, and made sense with the flow of the story.

The final piece of pre-production was gathering gear. Some of this had also occurred during the research phase of the project. Knowing that I would not have access to any of the RIT cage gear, I made a list of the absolute minimum gear necessary, and budgeted out everything that I would need to purchase. I had already practiced camera movements on different support systems and found that I could do everything I needed to with a standard tripod. Keeping the camera on a single set of legs, rather than going handheld or using a jib, dolly, or other kind of support system would also add to the photographic image quality that I was aiming for. The main things that I needed to rent was a lighting system for the one interior scene, neutral density filters, and hard drives. I already had my own camera, lens kit, sound kit, and tripod. Luckily, Adam, my cinematographer, had acquired an Arri softbank kit which he allowed us to use, as that would have been the biggest expense. Everything else I purchased on my own.

With the schedule in place, shooting order determined, and rehearsals complete, we were ready to move into production.

Production

Since I had put so much effort into creating the framework and schedule and overall planning, production ended up being the easiest part of the whole process. Though in many ways, it felt like just the tip of the iceberg, since so much of the story would be shaped in editing.

I wanted everyone to be able to move slowly and deliberately and keep the set relaxed so that everyone could do their best work. The weather was also forecast to be close to 90 degrees, so breaks would be absolutely necessary. For that reason, I asked everyone to arrive in Watkins Glen on Thursday evening to begin the first day of shooting early on Friday morning. Folks slowly arrived throughout the afternoon and evening on Thursday, and we were able to regroup, discuss the plan for the next day, lay out all the gear, charge batteries, and share a meal together. At this point, it was only Adam, Jake, Piper and I, since Rob (Sound) and Lani (Crafty) needed to arrive very early Friday morning due to their work schedules. It was a wonderful experience to have my friends and collaborators share this space that is very important to my family and I, and I'm glad they were able to experience its magic for an evening without the pressure of having to work. In particular, I think sleeping in that space, hearing the crickets and frogs and waves lapping against the stones really helped set the tone both of the film itself and of our work process.

The next day, we all woke up around 6am and watched the sunrise together. Rob and Lani arrived at 7am, and Lani prepared breakfast for us. We went over the plan for the first half of the day and ran through a rehearsal. The first scene we filmed was looking for glass along the beach.

We discussed ahead of time, based on my conversations with my brother and my own memories, that the most valuable pieces were blue and green, followed by white and brown. My family has always kept a stash of collected glass pieces in a dish in the cottage, so I knew that even if there weren't any pieces to find that day, we could use the pieces from my family and "re-collect" them. We filmed this scene with two cameras, one on shore getting close ups of Jake and Piper, and one in the water getting the wide shot. The most difficult part of this setup was placing the boom pole so that it didn't cast shadows or appear in either camera frame. There were a few moments in which we were not successful in this regard, but there was enough other footage that I was able to cut around it. While we filmed this scene, we got very lucky; we heard the rumble of a freight train coming down the tracks, which run between the Cargill Salt plan and US Salt, with the cottage situated right between them. We paused filming for a few minutes, but kept the cameras rolling, which allowed us to build the narrative of the train and flattened penny into the story line. Since we could not control the train and it doesn't run on a predictable schedule, this was something that we also considered part of the improvisation process.

The next scene we filmed was Jake attempting to do a kickflip on the lawn. This was a scene pulled from Jake's memory. Skateboarding was a way for young boys to prove themselves to each other, and not knowing how to do something could quickly cause friction. It was a situation ripe for sibling rivalry, as it would be easy for an older sibling to push the younger sibling's buttons for not knowing how to do something, especially something that the younger sibling cared a lot about. This scene was out of chronological order, so we needed to be mindful of shadows and filming directions. Luckily the weather was looking rather hazy, with some fog settling into the valley, so the shadows were quite soft by this point.

Then it was time to go up to the train tracks - the back border of the siblings' world. This involved bringing all the camera and gear up a fairly steep hill, so this was to be our final scene before taking a break. It was also the first scene we filmed with major dialogue portions that would move the plot along. Yet again, we didn't need to worry about finding a penny, flattened or not, because this was such a regular part of my childhood that I knew there would be several flattened pennies at the cottage for us to use as props. This scene was the first opportunity for the older sister to really assert herself as being "in charge" by attempting to enforce rules taught to the children by adults. Even though she also wants the rush of flattening the penny with the force of a freight train, she warns her brother that they could derail the train, feigning a sense of responsibility for her younger sibling.

After breaking for a few hours, we filmed the only indoor scene. We shot this in the middle of the afternoon so that the light would be at its brightest indoors. Shooting outdoors during this time would have created very harsh shadows on faces and not particularly interesting shadows on the landscape, since the sun would be directly overhead, so it made sense to do the indoor work at this point. We did still need a single light with diffusion to balance out the light from the outside windows, since there was no way to avoid shooting with windows behind the subjects. This is the first scene of the film, so we spent the longest amount of time improvising here. It was important that the most surface level goal - getting the brother to jump into the water - was established, as well as their relationship to each other and the context of the location and lack of adults. I knew that a good portion of the improvisation here would be cut out, but I wanted to be sure to have plenty to play with in the edit.

After that scene was complete, the sun was still too high in the sky for interesting shadows, and it was too hot to not be in the water, so we took another break while waiting for the sun to lower.

Following this break, we diverged slightly from the planned schedule. We wanted to fit in space for the siblings to be apart from each other as a contrast to their otherwise constant togetherness. Also, knowing that we had shots of the train going by, we wanted to craft a scene of near absolute quietness and solitude for the train to penetrate. We first filmed Jake skipping rocks at the shore. We used the same setup we had used to film the siblings collecting glass to create a sense of repetition and comfort. In this scene, he crafts what could loosely be called an altar to a dead crayfish out of shells, glass, and dropped gull feathers. Miraculously, the train went by again at this moment, and we were able to match the angles and get a shot of Jake looking up at the train as it went by. Next, we did the same scene with Piper on her own. I wanted to make sure she had something to do with her hands as she looked out at the lake and at her brother on the shore, so she picked a few wildflowers from around the yard and tied together a flower crown.

After we finished filming for the day, I transferred all the footage and sound onto a single drive, and played a few pieces back. In doing so, I realized that a few of the angles didn't match up and wouldn't cut together smoothly, and we would need to re-shoot at least two angles of the beach glass scene. Luckily, since I had built in quite a bit of down time, we had room to rearrange the schedule and get pickups in the same weekend.

The following day, we began with the reshoots from the previous day. There were no essential lines in the scene, so it was easy to recover, and served as a good warmup for getting the day started. Once we had hit a good stride, it was time to film Piper's swimming scene. This is the opening shot of the film, so it was essential that we get it right to set the tone. It's an extremely wide shot and required a lot of coordination between myself, Adam, Piper, and Rob. Not only did we need to get the camera movement right to see Piper come out of the water, but Piper needed to swim in time with the camera, and Rob needed to capture the audio of the waves and her movements on the dock without being in the frame. To add another layer of complexity, it was still quite early in the morning and the shadows were long, so Adam and I needed to be sure that our own shadows didn't fall into the frame.

We ended up having Piper start just outside of the frame in an innertube, which Lani held onto in the water after Piper started to swim across the frame. The most difficult part ended up being keeping Piper high enough in the frame, since the dock is not parallel to the landscape, and Piper had to swim in an unnaturally large diagonal in order to appear to be moving in a straight line. Eventually, we got the shot and were able to move on. The rest of the scene involved matching

the action of her walking down the length of the dock and into the cottage, which flows into the first, interior scene which we had filmed the day before.

At this point, the only scenes left to film were the longest scene with the most dialogue, the (relatively) climactic scene of Jake finally getting into the water, and the resolution scenes. Thinking that we had two days to shoot those scenes, we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing and packing up.

Unfortunately, things did not go as planned. Between our first shoot and second shoot, news of Daniel Prude's murder came to light in Rochester. We all felt that it was more important to show up for our community members, and agreed that spending time to film a piece which had nothing to do with the current state of affairs felt completely arbitrary and almost silly. We decided to cut the next weekend of filming a day short and attempt to squeeze everything into a single day. This did add quite a bit of stress because the weather was starting to change to fall weather; different flowers would be blooming in the next few weeks, creating continuity errors, and the water would begin getting dramatically colder. This meant we did not have room for reshoots and would need to wait an entire year before the weather would be the same again if we didn't get something. After much discussion between all members of the cast and crew, we decided that the course of action we were all most comfortable with was to cut the shoot a day short. We would arrive on Friday evening, and film the remaining scenes all on Saturday in order to make it back to Rochester by 8pm.

Luckily, we only had three scenes left to film. The day began much cloudier than the previous shoots had been, which worked out well for the first scene we shot. This was the first real moment of tension, so the choppier water and moodier skies set the scene well. This was also the longest scene, which presented some challenges given the format in which we were filming. In order for everything to go as smoothly as possible, Jake and Piper would need to have a minutes-long conversation, Piper would attempt to light a fire, fail, at which point Jake would take over and successfully light the fire. Then, the conversation would continue, Piper would get beers for the siblings to share, and they would then walk down the length of the dock, exiting the scene. Due to our limited number of fire logs, we only had one chance to get the fire going, and Jake had never lit a fire without lighter fluid.

We had to do some mental math about where we might stop the scene and move into other angles, since we would need to get close ups and medium shots of the fire being lit without any evidence of a fire from previous takes, and preserving the limited number of logs. We first filmed a master scene of everything up to Jake taking over fire building duties. Then, we moved into Piper's mediums and close ups up to that point, before switching to Jake's angles. Once we were satisfied that there would be plenty of improvisation to cut with from those angles, we moved back to the master angle and filmed everything from Jake re-setting the logs, lighting the fire, and the second half of the conversation. The fire and film gods were with us that day; the fire lit in one fluid motion on the first take, and the actors stayed fully in character as if that had been the expected outcome all along. We kept the same format of shots for the second half, first Piper's mediums and close ups, and then Jake's. A hard drive had filled up at this point, so we were down to one camera. This would present some issues in editing, but nothing unrecoverable.

Continuity in these last few scenes necessitated that we film chronologically. Jake had only a single tie-dye shirt, which meant that once it got wet - as it would in the climactic jump scene - it would be wet for the rest of the film. So after that long conversation, it was time to break for lunch, and to again wait for the sun to get a little lower in the sky.

Next up was the jump. My first instinct here was to try to match all the action perfectly from the siblings' walk away from the fire pit and onto the dock. However, as soon as we had set up the shot, I realized matching that action was going to be nearly impossible. I decided to have Jake and Piper walk into the frame, allowing for another long landscape shot as a transition. We also decided to use an ultra wide angle lens so that we could be very close up to them, but still show the entire landscape in the background, and allow for some space between them. We shot everything up to just before Piper was to push Jake over the edge, then moved the camera all the way back, almost to the opposite end of the property, to get an extreme wide view of the full action.

To put this scene in context, Seneca lake is extremely deep, and my family's dock is about 8 feet above the surface. It's a much higher dock than anyone else has these days, and the only legal reason we're allowed to have it that high is that it was built before any codes or zoning laws were put in place and we were grandfathered in. Yet I always assumed that when I jumped off the edge, I would never hit the bottom. I first realized how big I had grown since childhood the first time I jumped off the side of the dock and hit the rocks and zebra mussels covering the lake bed, and sliced open my feet. The zebra mussels have since died off, so it's safe now to swim without shoes on, though I always do just in case.

I wanted these siblings to have a similar experience. In this scene, the power dynamic between the two of them flip flops several times. First, Jake offers to bow to Piper's wish that he jumps off the dock - her surface level desire since the beginning of the film. Even though he is fulfilling Piper's wish, he's the one in control. To take back her power as the older sibling, Piper decides to push Jake, an act of minor violence that allows her to enforce her will on her brother. When that symbolic violence becomes real danger - Jake cuts his hand - she must use her real power, rather than control, to resolve the situation. In turn, she realizes that her brother is not a child; he's now tall enough to hit the bottom when he jumps off the edge of the dock.

This incident allows the siblings to see each other as real people, not flattened into the imagined roles imposed by childhood and gender. When Piper wraps Jake's hand in gauze, she's able to express tenderness towards her brother for the first time. Where she had previously convinced herself that she needed to exert power in order to feel adult, she is now able to be soft and caring, showing real responsibility. By this point in the day, the sun was already beginning to set, and we needed to open the apertures a bit wider to get proper exposure, which was essential for the black and white filming. The backgrounds became slightly softened, which worked well to differentiate these final few scenes from the rest of the film. The emotional shift is echoed in the formal qualities of the image.

The final scene was also filmed with this softer look. This last bit of dialogue and the reveal of the flattened penny ties up all the loose ends of the film, so we decided to shoot it in a more straightforward master-shot-reverse shot format. At this point we were also losing light fast, and needed to get back to Rochester. It was of course still improvised, and I wanted to preserve the

buffer time for each actor to experiment with lines and delivery. I was feeling quite rushed at this point, but tried not to let it affect my directing. After getting through the master angle with several takes, I decided to shave some time off the improvisations and just tell Jake and Piper which lines and intonation I wanted them to use. They had still come up with those things on their own in previous takes, but I didn't want to leave them guessing when we didn't have much time. Of course, not everything can go smoothly; our second hard drive ran out of space. Adam had a C-Fast card on hand, so we quickly made the transfer and finished up the last few lines.

And this was still not the end of the shoot. The mother, only briefly mentioned at the beginning of the film, needed to return for the bookend. I knew from the beginning that I didn't want to ever see the mother's face, and her return would be signalled only with audio cues. While the rest of the crew packed up, I got one last shot of Jake and Piper in the "kids' bed" that would serve as the closing shot. There's no movement and only one practical light source, so it was easy to grab. I then quickly recorded audio of Rob, who had recorded all of the other audio, opening the cottage door, stepping inside, and closing the door. The chaos of everyone else packing up around me resumed as soon as I said "I think we got it!" and we all rushed back to Rochester as quickly as possible. As we locked the door behind on the way out, it hit us all again that we truly had been in a separate world. Arriving back in Rochester would look very different from the peaceful sunset over the lake.

Post Production

By the first week of September, I had wrapped principal photography. I had decided to edit in DaVinci Resolve since I had shot on Blackmagic cameras, and their proprietary raw format worked best in that program. Editing audio would pose a bit of a challenge, but that was something I knew I wanted to spend a lot of time experimenting with anyways. My overall plan was to get the audio synced, pull selects, and have a rough cut within the first month or two of the semester, then I could spend a lot of time tweaking and editing audio. I wanted to edit audio, beyond basic dialogue, in tandem with the cut in order to build an environmental soundscape that both shaped and was shaped by the narrative.

I edited in a very non-linear fashion. I started off with the scenes that stood out most concretely in my head. The first scene felt very straightforward, as did the penny-on-the-tracks scene, climax, and final resolution. I laid those all out on the timeline, and then started crafting scenes based on the selects that strung those tentpole moments together. I quickly found that, as I strung things together, the nature of the characters relationship would morph and shift based on what I cut together - adding more reaction shots made their relationship feel more closely bonded, as if they were more acutely aware of each other, whereas keeping the viewer apart from the characters by staying in a two shot felt more distant and aloof. Shots of the landscape, which felt neutral as I had shot them, suddenly worked as both reaction shots and POVs.

As I watched the story and the characters' relationship shift, my editing became more active. I was able to make choices about how I wanted the characters to interact with each other as well as

with the landscape. Ultimately that meant that I had to move out of the selects I'd initially pulled, and start using lines and reaction shots from takes that I'd previously written off. I frequently pulled reaction shots from resets and the in-between moments of filming that weren't necessarily part of the directed acting, and used off-screen audio to fill in lines.

After getting the whole story laid out in a timeline, I exported a version at about 40 minutes long to gather feedback. The main criticism I received was that there was too much dialogue. So I began experimenting with just how much dialogue I could cut out and keep the story intact. I began with any lines in which the characters explained what they were doing or about to do. Then, I cut out all explicit references to past memories. I figured that the implicit memories were all that was needed - if it's a shared memory, there's no need for the characters to explain it to each other. Then, I began cutting lines at random just to see how much I could get away with; it turned out to be a lot. The story was then cut down to around 25 minutes.

I showed this version of the film at in-progress SOFA screenings to faculty and other students. For the most part, people seemed to respond positively, and many expressed emotions that I had been hoping to achieve. A few people mentioned that there was too much transition time between activities - enough people brought up those long transitions that I knew I'd have to cut some of my favorite shots in pursuit of a tighter story. I cut out almost every transition from scene to scene with one exception. I left a shot early in the story in which the siblings exit the cottage, the camera following both of them at first, then lingering on the sister as she pauses and takes in the scene. In the same shot, the camera, seeming to have a mind of its own, turns and looks out to the shore, towards the brother, who has begun looking for beach glass. I specifically

chose to leave this transition shot in because it emphasizes the voyeuristic qualities of both the camera and memory. When we make a photograph, we put ourselves outside of the situation, filtered through the lens. Similarly, when we access a memory, we are no longer in that specific past, or entirely within the present, but rather somewhere in between, just watching.

Once I had all the shots generally in order, I began tweaking and building up the sound design. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to create natural soundscapes, so I'd had Rob record several minutes of ambient audio during production. This included lots of crickets, cicadas, and some frogs, as well as water lapping up on the rocks, boats coming and going, and many different bird calls. I also drew on my own audio library which included recordings made during my undergraduate thesis production at the same location. I shaped all of these around the emotions of each scene, trying to keep the ebb and flow of volume and quality of sounds consistent with the cuts. I used crow sounds to signal growing tensions, quiet waves for calm introspection, and crickets to give a sense of late summer nostalgia. I also panned the water sounds based on the camera's spatial relationship to the water to create geography in the audio. I added in a few moments of foley as well, specifically for small movements in close up shots that would normally be too quiet to make any noise, such as shells and glass clinking. The final piece of audio I added in, with the exception of music, was the sound of the unseen mother returning home. The sounds of her opening the door, then walking into and moving about the space even after the picture has faded gives the impression that this story continues even after the credits have rolled.

After getting a solid audio mix and the cutting down to just under 20 minutes, I just needed to make some technical changes. Since I had decided to use a few off-mic lines that were recorded either in rehearsals or were picked up from opposing angles, I needed to do some ADR recording to clean them up. Luckily, all of those lines were off screen, so they didn't need to match mouth movements. Because of COVID precautions, I didn't want my actors to go to RIT's campus if they weren't comfortable being in that environment, so we opted to record in my car. This worked surprisingly well, and I was able to match all the necessary lines.

Lastly, I experimented with music. Because my title and much of the feeling I wanted to evoke in my film was inspired by the traditional song "Cumberland Gap" I wanted that piece to be present, even if only loosely. I started off by downloading various versions of the tune, including some public domain versions, but knowing that I'd most likely need to record or commission my own version for the film. At first, nothing seemed to work. Most variants of the tune were too rhythmic, and overpowered the subtle emotional shifts in the film, which made it feel like a music video. After a few tries, I decided to ditch the melody of the song altogether. Instead, I recorded the chords of the song individually using a synthesizer to shape the drones. Then, I layered those chords so that they flowed freely into one another. To add another layer of texture, my partner, JT Fitgerald recorded the same chords on baritone guitar. I was skeptical of this at first, based on how much the other arrangements of the same song had affected the feeling of the cut, and changed it rather than enhanced it. However, as soon as I layed our new recording into the timeline, I knew this was how it was meant to be. It perfectly communicated the nostalgia, the anxiety, and the peacefulness that this place embodies for me, and the feelings that I wanted

this film to express. I had been on the fence about using music in this piece at all, but I'm very pleased with the end result.

Audience Reception & Reflection

Looking back on this project overall, I'm very happy with the work my collaborators and I accomplished. There were so many unforeseen hurdles along the way, and we were able to adapt as needed, and I don't think the piece suffered for it at all. There will always be obstacles and exceptions and unaccounted for missteps, but the fact that the production held together tells me that we were well prepared for the twists and turns, and that building flexibility into the production process is a hugely valuable skill.

If I were to change anything about the film, the only thing I would do differently would be to film more behind the scenes and making-of moments, which I would have then cut into the narrative as if they had been in character. It would have added another layer of documentary to work with in shaping the story, though there would have been drawbacks too. It would have required a lot more media storage space, required more time to edit, and might not have been all that useful. Hindsight is 20/20, but there's also no way of knowing what that alternate process would have produced, so I won't dwell on could-have-beens.

Most public screening feedback has been very positive. People connect with the landscape in the way I was aiming for, and are affected by the late summer haze of nostalgia. The looseness of the narrative comes across as dreamy, rather than slow and clunky. One person mentioned that the scenes felt disconnected, as if they were all happening out of time from each other. That person may have viewed that as negative criticism or something to be improved on, but as it was almost exactly the feeling out-of-time that I'd been trying to intentionally construct, I took it as a

compliment. Perhaps that one piece of criticism does mean that I wasn't intentional enough, but since only one person mentioned it, I don't mind some level of audience disagreement. Many other people spoke to me afterwards about their own childhood and summer vacation memories, their relationships with their siblings, and other relationships which are contained within specific landscapes. I'm very grateful for all the conversations I've had as a result; people have been very vulnerable with me after watching this film, which makes me feel like the film itself must be vulnerable and genuine. I appreciate that others can see me through my film in that way, and I hope to continue to make art that others can respond to with such openness.

Appendix

Thesis Proposal

Logline:

On a hot summer day in Watkins Glen, NY, a young brother and sister left to their own devices find that sibling power dynamics permeate even the smallest moments.

Treatment:

Looking northward from the end of the dock over Seneca Lake, four hills converge on the horizon, just past International Salt. Small surface waves are the only movement on this hot, sticky day. Gulls caw from above. Looking down from the dock, the water looks almost black, but there's life underneath. Mary's face emerges from the ink, and she wades through the water now that her feet can touch the mossy bottom.

She walks into the cottage, where her brother, Daniel, is reading an Isaac Asimov book. She eats a blackberry from the carton on the kitchen table, and wonders with her brother where their mother is.

The siblings sit for a while in contemplative silence. After a few moments, Mary suggests that they should put a penny on the train tracks to flatten it. Daniel's fear of the train derailing makes him hesitate, but eventually Mary wins out by arguing that she's the one who will get in trouble anyways.

While Mary and Daniel wait for a train to come, they move down towards the stony shore. They collect seaglass and skip rocks, competing to see who can get the most skips. Though Mary is sure of her superior skipping - as the older sibling, she's had more practice - Daniel undeniably has the stronger arm. Mary leaves the shore in a huff, walks down to the end of the lower dock, and slides into the water. She wades under the shadow of the upper dock, the water hitting just under her eyes, and watches her brother collect handfuls of dried seaweed from the bank.

Daniel carries the pile of dead lake plant up to the fire pit and throws it over the white ashes. Mary, still in the water, turns her back to him and watches the traffic across the lake. When she turns back, Daniel has started a huge fire. Mary runs out of the water, and frantically searches for something to put the fire out. She tries to smother it with a chain-link net on a long handle, while arguing with Daniel about all the things they're not allowed to do without a parent there. But Daniel insists it's fine, Mom has let him do it before. As Mary watches the flames, Daniel drags two lawn chairs over to the pit, offering one to Mary. They sit for a few moments and toss wet rocks into the flame waiting for the POP.

Eventually, Mary gets up and walks back out to the end of the dock. Daniel gets up too, but goes to the shore to collect a huge wad of wet seaweed. He takes the squishy mass over to the fire and throws it onto the flames, which immediately turn to steam.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Mary shuffles and deals out a set of cards. Mary proposes a deal that if she wins, Daniel has to jump in the lake. But if Daniel wins, Mary has to tell mom that she stole $20, even though they both know it was Daniel. Daniel's rationale is that mom already thinks it was Mary, so Mary will get praise for owning up to it, Mary objects because mom already thinks Daniel is the good kid, so he'll get in less trouble.

Mary wins. "You have to jump in now."

Daniel convinces Mary to wait, he'll jump in after they eat dinner. They decide to grill hot dogs and corn cobs. They argue about who gets to light the grill - Mary because she's older, Daniel because he knows how to light a fire. Daniel accuses Mary of not trusting him with responsibility, to which Mary responds "you're right, I don't trust you, why would I trust you when you couldn't even watch Daisy for an hour by yourself!"
"That's not my fault!"
"Nothing's your fault!"
Daniel, picks up the bag of charcoal again, runs to the edge of the breakfront screaming "It wasn't my fault!" and pours a rain of black briquettes into the water.

Mary wades into the water, gathers the wet charcoal and throws it back onto the grass before rejoining her brother back at the kitchen table. Instead of dinner, they pick at the box of blackberries.

The two siblings stand at the end of the dock, Daniel now ready to fulfill his end of the bargain. As he inhales, he steps forward with his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Mary's arms shoot out and she shoves her brother over the edge.

His scream lasts only a brief moment before a huge splash.

Mary leans over the edge of the dock, waiting for Daniel to resurface.

The scream continues as blood starts to pool in the water.

Mary runs to the other side of the water and meets her brother in the waist-deep water. A gash in Daniel's hand leaks blood into the waves.

Mary runs back into the house for a washcloth and first aid kit.

She runs back out to the water, where Daniel still stands in tears. She sets the first aid supplies on the edge of the breakfront and walks her brother back to shore. They sit on the edge, Mary holds her brother's hand in her lap and gently pats it dry before bandaging it.

As the sun starts to set behind the cottage, the waves calm down, and the crickets start chirping. The fog horn bellows from the salt plant at the south end of the lake, marking the start of the night shift. Mary changes into pajamas and climbs into bed, Daniel does the same. He sleeps with his bandaged hand on top of the old quilt. As the kids fall asleep in the same bed, the storm door creaks open and their mother quietly enters the other bedroom.

Rationale:

"If It Ain't Here" is a strongly tonal and impressionistic piece with a quiet narrative based on my real-life experiences of spending summers with my younger brother on Seneca Lake. The film will be shot in black and white with long, reflective landscape shots based on my father's and Ansel Adams'/the f64 group's photography styles.
I'm starting off with this photographic description because I really want to highlight several things.
1) the Finger Lakes landscape
2) my family's relationship to photography and
3) the use of photography as a means of documentation and saying 'I was here once.'

The slow, contemplative nature of the film will reflect the patience required to set up a perfect shot, as well as the slow stickiness of a hot summer day that can only be cured by diving into the fresh water.

The narrative itself will feature an older sister who has the benefit of being the first born in the family and many of the privileges that come along with that, and a younger brother, who has the benefits of being the only boy in the family and the privileges inherent to that position. As they find ways to fill their day without adult supervision, the activities slowly reveal the tension between the siblings. Eventually they are forced to set aside their grievances and work together to survive.

The geography of the land will also play a huge role in the narrative. The siblings are limited in their movement - by the lake on one side and train tracks on the other. As their tensions drive them apart, they cannot actually escape each other, making closeness essential. I want to use the land as a tool to illustrate how our relationship to geography affects our relationships to ourselves and the people around us.

Vision:

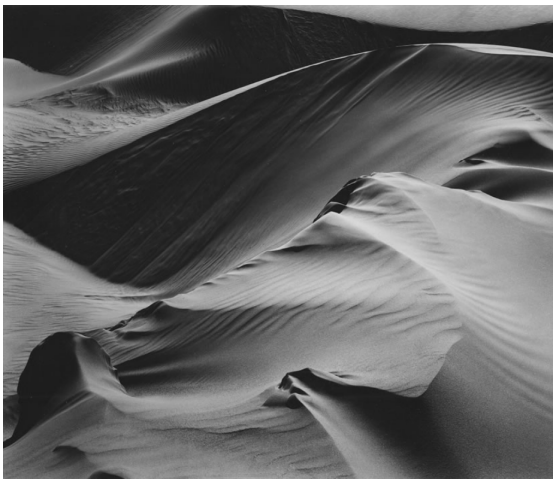
Shot in black and white with high contrast and deep tonal range, this look of this film is strongly integrated with the story. The black and white will not only reference the photography of the f64 group, but also underscore the importance of memory and nostalgia in the building of personal identities.

Because this story takes place in the summer, the greater amount of light will allow me to use deep, sharp focus. The greater depth of field will force me to build compositions entirely through mise-en-scene, formal composition, and the use of light and shadow as subjects.

1000 Islands by Ansel Adams

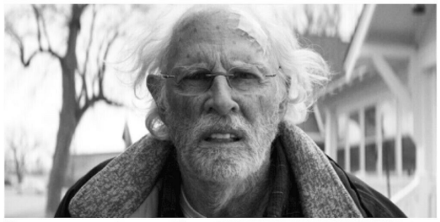
Jeffrey Pine on Sentinel Dome by Ansel Adams

Mexican Lake by Brett Weston



Dunes by Brett Weston

Unmade Bed by Imogene Cunningham



Other film inspirations include *Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren - though my piece will not be strictly experimental - *Hiroshima Mon Amour* by Alain Resnais, *Le Quattro Volte* by Michaelangelo Frammartino, and *Nebraska* by Alexander Payne (stills below).

To execute this vision, I will use a very small crew, allowing for more flexibility in the environment and less organizational chaos, which will give me time to find each shot as it unfolds. In turn, this will give the two actors room to improvise and find their characters' voices and behaviors without having to work around a strict cast/crew hierarchy. I want to create a space for both the crew and actors to find and build their own dramatic moments, rather than prescribe creativity.

Much of the pre-production work will focus on rehearsals with the cast in the months leading up to production. Significant parts of the story will be written with the actors based on what we find together during that rehearsal time. There will be at least one weekend of rehearsals at the location in Watkins Glen before shooting to familiarize the actors with the landscape and determine blocking.

I will also go to Watkins Glen several times by myself during the preproduction phase to plan shots and determine gear needs. Most of the lighting will rely on augmented natural light, with an emphasis on cutting and shaping light with flags/negative fill, rather than adding more additional light (except where necessary) which cut down on gear.

Ultimately, shooting in black and white with minimal crew and gear will create an intimate space in which everyone's artistic voices can build a story together. I hope that, while this narrative is small and familial in scope, viewers will have to confront their own ideas about landscape, family, and how the stories of their lives are built by the world around them.

Schedule

	DAY 0	DAY 1	DAY 2		DAY 3A	DAY 3	DAY 4
7:00 AM		bfast/setup	bfast/setup			bfast/setup	bfast
8		scene 3					misc. pickups
9		scene 2	scene 6				
10							
11			broll/lanscape shooting				
12:00		lunch	lunch			lunch	lunch
1							
2		scene 1				scene 2 pickups	
3			scene 7			scene 3 pickups	
4							
5						scene 5 pickups	
6	Arrive in WG	scene 5	scene 4		Arrive in WG	dinner	
7	Dinner/group mtg	scene 6	dinner		dinner/planning meeting		
8		dinner					

Budget

Gear					
	Camera	already owned	$0		
	Lenses	already owned	$0		
	Tripod	already owned	$0		
	Sound Kit	Adam	$0		
	Boom Pole	already owned	$0		
	Arri Softbank	Adam	In Kind		
	Diffusion	Adam	In Kind		
	Flag Kit	RIT cage	In Kind		
	Hard Drive		$300		
			TOTAL	$300	
Crew					
	Sound		$50		
	Director	self			
	DP	self & Adam	$50		
			TOTAL	$100	
Cast					
	Piper		$50		
	Jake		$50		
			TOTAL	$100	
Crafty					
	Day 1	1 meal	$60		
	Day 2	3 meals	$180		
	Day 3	3 meals	$180		
	Day 4	2 meals	$120		
			TOTAL	$540	
Travel					
	Crew Car	gas 2 ways	$30		
	Gear Car	" "	$30		
	Cast Car	" "	$30		
			TOTAL	$90	
				SUBTOTAL	$1,130
			Contingency	10%	$110
				TOTAL	**$1,240**

Scene/Script Outline

Outline developed by Clara Riedlinger, with actors/co-conspirators Jacob Walsh & Piper Austin

SCENE 1
Piper goes back inside -
(Piper leads)

- Jake reading on couch
- Piper challenges Jake to jump in the lake
- They go outside, but Jake won't jump
- Jake opts to look for seaglass instead, they poke around the beach together for a few minutes, when Jake finds a penny

SCENE 2
Leaving a penny on the train tracks
(Jake Leads)

- It's against the rules, but not a huge infraction
- Piper tells the story about Mom clinging to the rocks as the train goes by as evidence that they should be taking more risks. Jake interprets it as a reason not to hang out on the tracks.
- Do you know when the train comes? Nope, guess we just have to wait.
- Piper goes back to the dock/deck, sits alone

subtle time shift/ambient landscape shots

SCENE 3
Kickflips
(Piper leads)

- Jake either trying to kickflip on the grass
- Piper won't leave him alone, challenges him again.

SCENE 4

- "Why do you have to make everything a competition?
- Jake (now leads), reveals that he's not going to college, taking a gap year
- Piper reveals her feelings that mom & dad have always trusted Jake more

- last semester of hs what classes?
- A bunch of APs to get college credits
- What are you thinking about for college?
- Haven't made up my mind yet
- Deadlines?
- Gap year
- Argument ends in silence
- "I'm bored let's build a fire"
- Rocks

SCENE 4.5
Fire

- Piper "I'm bored, do you want to start a fire?"
    - Jake "aren't we not supposed to do that without an adult around?"
- Piper tries to prove how responsible she is by trying to start a fire, but can't get it started.
- Jake, more of a survivalist/more capable (even though Piper won't admit it), starts a fire without issue.
- Jake silently goes to pick up some wet rocks for them to throw into the flames.
- Piper suggests that since Jake is so adult, they should have a beer.

SCENE 5
First beer

- Jake insists that he's already had a bunch of 'firsts' including his first beer
- Good Time Piper
- Larger argument about how Piper is still mad, but Jake didn't have any control over how mom & dad treated her, so she shouldn't really be mad at him
- But Jake also never stood up for Piper, so she never felt like he was on her side.
- "What would make you feel better about this?"
    - "If you jump off the dock"
- Piper and Jake finish their beers, and Jake finally works up the courage to jump off the dock

SCENE 6

Jake jumps

- He can only jump off the shallow side
- He's still nervous, Piper pushes him in
- Jake cuts his hand on zebra mussels
- Piper bandages him, finally expressing her own care and capability.

SCENE 7

Nighttime

- Piper and Jake share a bed, Jake's bandaged hand visible from the doorway
- Sound of Mom re-entering.

Behind the Scenes


Seneca Lake

Stills

DIRECTED & EDITED BY

Clara Riedlinger

STARRING

Jacob Walsh
Piper Jane Austin

WRITTEN BY

Clara Riedlinger
Jacob Walsh
Piper Jane Austin

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MFA DEGREE IN THE SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION, ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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